

Building Information Age Communities
IT Planning and Mini Grant Program

Progress Report

September 23, 2003

**A Cooperative Effort of
University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension
Technologies Across Nebraska
and the Nebraska Information Technology Commission**

IT Planning and Mini Grant Program

In the fall of 2002, eight communities and regional groups began conducting technology assessments and developing a technology plan using the *IT Planning and Assessment Workbook*. Each participating community received a \$2,500 mini grant to support their IT planning efforts. As of Sept. 22, 2003, six of the eight communities and regional groups have completed technology plans. Alliance, Custer County, Edgar, Keya Paha/Brown/Rock Counties, West Point and York have prepared technology plans and are moving into the implementation phase. The remaining two committees are also making progress. The Crawford-Harrison technology committee has applied for a grant from the USDA Rural Utilities Service and is waiting to hear if their application has been funded before developing a formal technology plan. The Fillmore County technology committee expects to have their plan completed by the end of October.

Alliance

The Box Butte County Information Technology Committee surveyed local businesses to determine their technology training needs. The survey revealed that many businesses needed basic computer training. Using information from the survey and their initial assessment, the committee developed a technology plan, identifying education, promoting e-commerce, and infrastructure development as priority areas. The technology committee has already begun implementing their plan, focusing on providing one-on-one training for area businesses and offering classes. Through a cooperative effort with REAP, an e-commerce class will start in mid-October. The IT Committee will be offering partial scholarships for participants. The committee has also compiled a list of online training opportunities. The Box Butte County Information Technology Committee's planned action steps for addressing the technology training needs of businesses and residents are included below:

Planned Action Steps

1. Organize New Classes
Information gathered from our survey pointed out the need for beginner level classes on many subjects. These will be offered on a flexible time schedule to fit into varied work schedules.
2. Advertise and Promote Current and New Class Offerings
We will build public awareness of educational opportunities through a variety of advertising media.
3. Develop Mentoring Activities and Support
We will work to organize a pool of IT professionals to act as mentors for businesses and individuals. Our new laptop will allow these individuals to take education and assistance directly to consumers to help them better understand the technology and its applications.
4. Find Innovative Approaches to Best Utilize Limited IT Resources
Computer labs needed for training are limited in number and often unavailable. The Committee will research ways to use these resources during off-hours, as well as attempt to locate additional equipment and training sites.
5. Research Use of Cable TV Channel as a Delivery Method for Free Community Education
The local cable television company has a local community access channel available for public use. The Committee will work to develop a series of free classes to be broadcast on this channel.

Custer County

In Custer County, several priorities and action items were identified by the community, including:

- Addressing the need for DSL in the community;
- Redesigning the Broken Bow Chamber of Commerce Web site;
- Redesigning the Custer County Web site; and
- Working with local businesses to address their technology needs.

Mike Wrenholt, a student at the University of Nebraska, spent the summer in Broken Bow working on these activities as an intern through the J.D. Edwards Honor Program, The University of Nebraska Rural Initiative and Congressman Osborne's office.

Wrenholt did background research on deploying DSL in Broken Bow and helped organize a meeting with the president of Qwest Nebraska, Rex Fisher. Due to the large interest shown at that meeting, Broken Bow has moved up on Qwest's list of cities to receive DSL. Wrenholt also updated the Web sites for the Chamber of Commerce and Custer County. Several local businesses also received assistance from Wrenholt.

Crawford-Harrison

Crawford identified broadband access as their highest priority. Although smaller, Harrison has broadband access through the local cable company. Crawford and Harrison conducted a community survey to better determine community usage of the Internet. Crawford also conducted an engineering study. The information from the survey and the engineering study was used to prepare an application for the Rural Utilities Service Community Connect Broadband Grant Program. At last report, Crawford's application is still being considered for a second round of awards. Further development of the technology plan is on hold until the community is informed of the results of the Community Connect grant competition. If Crawford does not receive a grant, the community is considering proceeding without the grant.

Crawford is also developing a city Web site (www.crawfornebraska.net) It is being developed as a community bulletin board and community center as well. A priority at this time is to get city information and services online. The next phase is to help local businesses develop Web sites. Future plans include being able to develop and offer Web-based courses.

Edgar

At their initial meeting, the technology committee in Edgar narrowed down the assessment areas in the *Building Information Age Communities E-readiness Assessment* to four areas: community leadership and support; telecommunications infrastructure; technology literacy and access; and economic development and e-commerce. The Edgar technology committee worked with Kay Payne at the Center for Rural Research and Development at the University of Nebraska--Kearney to conduct a community survey which included a section on information technology. The surveys were hand-delivered and picked up by community volunteers, leading to a very high response rate (87%). The survey indicated that there was strong community support for a community center and a high level of interest in participating in computer training.

The survey found:

- In only 30% of the households, could no one operate a computer.
- Sixty-two percent of households owned a computer.

- Forty-nine percent of households have Internet access at home.
- Seventy-seven percent of home-based businesses have Internet access.
- Sixty-five percent of businesses owned by Edgar residents (both within the city limits and in the surrounding rural area) have Internet access.
- Fifty-two percent of households are interested in computer education. The total number of individuals interested in attending computer training is estimated at nearly 200.
- Edgar is relatively youthful. Forty-four percent of households have children in K-12. Those 35-44 years old (20%) and 45-54 years old (18%) comprised the largest population segments.

In July, Edgar received a \$250,000 Community Development Block Grant to build a community center. In September, Edgar completed their technology plan. The community center is a key component of the plan. Plans for the new Edgar Community Center will incorporate spaces for a multimedia center and an Information Technology Learning Center, including teleconferencing capability. Other action items include expanding the upcoming Department of Economic Development Business Retention and Expansion Survey to include a survey of all major businesses in Edgar as to their current usage, capabilities and needs for e-commerce, e-marketing, and training. Training will be offered to meet the needs identified in the business survey. The revitalization of the community Web site is also planned.

Fillmore County

The Fillmore County technology committee conducted a community survey and is currently finishing their assessment and technology plan. The survey found that 75% of the households responding had a computer. Approximately two-thirds of the households had Internet access, with approximately 14% of the households having broadband access. There was considerable interest in computer training opportunities. Over 40% of the households indicated an interest in participating in local computer training classes.

Businesses also showed a high rate of computer use. Nearly all businesses (97%) reported having a computer, and 86% of the businesses had Internet access. Approximately 30% of the businesses had broadband Internet access. Employees in over 50% of the businesses have e-mail accounts. Approximately 30% of the businesses have Web sites; 5% of the businesses have full-service e-commerce sites capable of taking orders. Businesses are using computers for accounting (76%), research (72%), payroll (46%), and inventory (43%). Businesses report a strong interest in computer training. Approximately 54% of businesses would be interested in computer training classes.

Keya Paha/Brown/Rock Counties

The *2003 Information Technology Assessment and Plan for the KBR Region, Nebraska* focuses on telecommunications infrastructure; technology literacy and access; and economic development and e-commerce. The KBR Techknowledge Coalition will begin implementation of their plan this fall. Patty Barstow, the Executive Director of the North Central Development Center in Ainsworth contributed the following tips which were included in the revised *Community IT Planning Workbook*:

- Select committee members that are interested in technology growth.
- Have work sessions instead of meetings so you don't have to worry about quorums, etc.
- Have a large enough group to cover the members that lose interest or don't attend work sessions.
- Make sure all counties/communities are represented equally.
- Make sure all members have email and check it regularly.

- Have 2-3 hour work sessions and don't meet as often.
- Keep work sessions moving so members don't feel they are wasting time.
- Rotate meeting places between counties/communities and alternate times to accommodate members' schedules.
- Utilize e-mail for contact between work sessions.
- Conduct some work sessions via e-mail if most agenda items are following up previous discussions with research/feedback.
- Keep members well informed with work session dates/times, agendas, work session summaries, research web sites, etc.
- Request RSVP's for work sessions so you know who is planning to attend and who is reading their e-mail.
- Accept the fact that there will not be full attendance at all work sessions.
- Accept the fact that some members will lose interest.

Members from the committee were selected to represent each of the e-readiness areas. The most important thing is to have all committee members online and encourage (sometimes insist) they check their e-mail often. If you entice them with having some work sessions via e-mail they are more willing to check it regularly☺

We conducted monthly work sessions that lasted from two to three hours. The rationale for this was to accomplish lots of work with the least amount of travel time (an issue in our rural area, especially in winter). Agendas were e-mailed several days before the work session then I followed each session with an email summary of what was discussed/decided. I also sent another e-mail mid-month with a reminder of the date of the next work session. I did most of the research for the survey, etc. then e-mailed the web sites to the members so they could review them before the work session. This kept everyone up to date even if they didn't get to attend some work sessions.

We rotated our work sessions between the three counties and also alternated between afternoon and evening. About midway through the process I began requesting RSVP's to know who was planning to attend the meeting. I did this for two reasons. First, that told if some were not reading their emails. If I felt someone wasn't reading their e-mail regularly, I would call "just to update" them then casually ask them to watch for more info via e-mail. Second, it allowed me to change the meeting place, or even time, if all attendees happened to be from one community. For example if everyone coming was from Ainsworth we had the meeting here instead of everyone driving to a different town.

When working with a large group from several communities you must assume there will not be full attendance at all work sessions. I tried to keep everyone informed and encouraged them to participate with feedback and attend the community forums.

The KBR TechKnowledge Coalition 2003 Information Technology Assessment and Plan was included in the revised *Community IT Planning Workbook* as a sample plan.

West Point Area

In northeast Nebraska, West Point, Wisner, Beemer, Bancroft, Dodge, Scribner, Schuyler, Oakland, Lyons and Pender have developed a regional technology plan. The plan focuses on telecommunications infrastructure; economic development and e-commerce; and local government and community services.

Telecommunications Infrastructure. Currently some homes and businesses have cable modem, DSL or fixed wireless service available. Forming a regional technology committee has facilitated discussions with providers. The area has seen an expansion in the provision of

broadband services—particularly fixed wireless service. A significant portion of the rural areas more than a couple of miles outside of the city limits cannot receive broadband services via cable modem, DSL, or fixed wireless services. The possibility of developing an engineering plan to “fill in the gaps” for high-speed Internet access was explored. Because of the complexity and costs associated with the current technologies the study was deemed infeasible. Suggested action items include meeting with public officials to discuss the problems rural communities encounter while trying to become Information Age communities; creating an online directory of information technology services available in the region; and continuing to explore ways of providing high-speed Internet access to farming and livestock operations, agribusinesses and acreages.

Economic Development and E-Commerce. There is some recognition in the area that information technology is an economic development tool. Some local businesses are using information technology effectively to improve productivity and expand markets. Surveys were conducted in Scribner and Oakland to determine how businesses in those communities were using technology. Action plan suggestions include meeting with the Department of Economic Development to better understand the needs of information-based businesses; working with high school students or a college intern to help local businesses adopt and enhance e-business applications; sponsoring e-commerce training in two communities in 2004; and coordinating a technology fair.

Local Government and Community Services. Several communities have informational Web sites, however, most are limited to economic development information. Suggested action items include offering basic computer and Internet training to county and local government officials and employees, and offering Cooperative Extension’s Access e-Gov training to county and local government officials and employees.

York

After reviewing the results of a community survey, the York County has developed a draft technology plan. The plan identifies four priority areas: local government and community services; e-commerce and economic development; technology literacy and access; and leadership. Leadership development and local government services were identified as the highest priorities. The action plans for these areas are listed below:

Local Government Services Action Plan

1. Aggregate needs for agencies and build spirit of cooperation among various government entities and agencies.
2. Study current systems in place in other communities.
3. Work with entities to provide adequate budget support for implementation.
4. Ensure adequate training of public officials and end using public.
5. Encourage local governments to digitize City/County Services such as:
 - Ordinances and Forms
 - Meeting agendas and minutes
 - Entity services and/or resources online

Community Leadership Action Plan

1. Educate current and future leaders of technology advantages.
 - a. Leadership York
 - b. Youth Leadership York
 - c. Service Clubs Education
2. Develop county-wide strategic information technology plan and share the vision.
3. Broaden representation of the Technology Committee by seeking the involvement of seniors, youth, industry, businesses, technology providers and governmental entities in committee activities.

Lessons Learned

1. Community technology planning requires a substantial time commitment from technology committee members and facilitation by energetic, committed community leaders. The mini grant program provided an incentive for communities to focus on technology planning.
2. The *Community IT Planning Workbook* simplifies the planning process. Participants liked the workbook and appreciated not having to develop their own assessment and planning tools. Participants suggested that sample plans and a glossary of technology terms be included. These changes were made to the revised *Community IT Planning Workbook*. In addition, the facilitator's guide was revised and includes tips gleaned from working with the participating communities as well as tips from community leaders. Additional worksheets to help committees plan supplemental assessment activities, build community support, develop a technology plan, and plan implementation activities were also developed. The workbook is beginning to gain national recognition as a valuable resource. The NITC has already received a request from Minnesota to use the workbook in a broadband promotion project.
3. Sometimes forming a technology committee can attract the attention of telecommunications providers, facilitating discussions between the community and providers on the availability and deployment of advanced services.
4. Documenting community needs through the assessment process can assist in the preparation of successful grant applications.

Future Plans

Six more community and regional groups are participating in the 2003-2004 IT Planning and Mini Grant Program. Ord, Homer, and Hastings have already held their initial committee meetings. Other participating communities include Dakota City, Maskell, and Lexington.